

Coastal Decision-Makers Workshop Goes Nationwide

Workshop participants discuss the impacts associated with development of coastal hardwoods.



Photos courtesy of Rookery Bay NERIS

Most of the nation's coastal states soon will benefit from the Coastal Decision-Makers Workshops created by staff from a National Estuarine Research Reserve in Florida. NOAA is providing the funding that will bring this educational tool to all 22 Reserves in October.

"This is a program that every coastal management organization can utilize," said Ginger Hinchcliff, Rookery Bay education coordinator and environmental specialist III with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. "This is environmental education and there is a huge amount of information to get into people's hands in order for them to make and support wise decision making. These workshops really make a difference."

Thirteen Reserves across the country and Florida's Coastal Management Program have already implemented the program.

It all began when the staff at Rookery Bay took a close look at the congressional mandate given to all Reserves. Promoting "informed decision making" was an important part of this directive. The first step was to identify the

decision makers in southwest Florida.

Hinchcliff said they realized many of the environmental professionals working in Florida had been trained outside of the state and were making decisions without having important information about the area's environmental needs. "It was clear we needed a training system that would help people and agencies share information, methods, and techniques."

In 1988, Hinchcliff helped organize a workshop geared toward environmental professionals such as permitting staff, land planners, and coastal managers. The workshop was a success and showed there was an audience hungry for technical information.

The Coastal Decision-Makers Workshops, as they are now called, are offered by Rookery Bay six times a year. The program is so popular Rookery Bay staff have to turn people away. It also produces results.

During one workshop on the status of southwest Florida's emergency oil spill response, it was discovered that hundreds of miles of the Reserve's shoreline featuring

pristine mangrove forests were excluded, Hinchcliff said. Because of the program, the shoreline was added to the response plan.

"There are a number of success stories from Reserves around the country," she said. "We have seen these workshops work over and over again."

The Rookery Bay workshops follow a set structure, which the other programs are using as a guide. However, Hinchcliff is quick to point out that each program has variations and that she is a "firm believer in looking at what a specific site needs and making changes to meet those needs. I encourage everyone who asks me about the program to make it relevant to their community."

Most of the workshops are held on a Friday and feature three speakers in the morning and a hands-on element in the afternoon. The speakers, who are not paid, are experts from around the state and region who present the latest research on subjects such as watershed issues, soil erosion processes, and protection of shellfish areas.

Because of the technical nature of the workshops, Hinchcliff is

careful to invite only environmental professionals. While other programs have opened their workshops to the public and elected officials, Hinchcliff believes in targeting the decision makers, or those who inform the decision makers.

She said holding the workshops at the Reserve is also beneficial because the attendees become familiar with the site and look to them for information in the future. "Workshop attendees are much better at taking us into account when they're making decisions, and they often come to us for our input. It's a great networking tool."

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Estuarine Research
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Rookery Bay does not charge any fees for the workshops because many agencies can't send a representative if there is a charge. They do limit the number of attendees to about 30 to allow more participation and to encourage "off-the-record" discussions, which Hinchcliff said are often the most

Gary Lytton, Rookery Bay Reserve manager, describes the value of watershed management to workshop participants.

valuable part of the program. She ends each program by having the participants fill out a survey.

Hinchcliff uses a mailing list of 500 to market the program. She said the program has grown to the point where she sends out only one notice, but new programs will want to send out separate notices about each workshop until they build a solid attendance base. The workshops are coordinated by Rookery Bay education staff, but when the NOAA grant gives their program budget more permanence, she plans to hire someone to facilitate the workshops.

After seeing the success of Rookery Bay's workshops, the Florida Coastal Management Program (FCMP) introduced the training concept to other Florida organizations, such as the National Estuary Programs, the Department of Environmental Protection's Aquatic Preserve Programs, and the Apalachicola Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve.

"I really just followed Ginger's example," said Camille Coley, FCMP community program administrator. "We wanted to show them how to do it and see if they were interested." Her program even volunteered to fund mailing supplies and speakers' fees.

Six agencies took Coley up on the initial offer. Today, eight sites in Florida provide Coastal Decision-Makers Workshops, and other organizations, such as Sea Grant, have approached Coley about participating. Each organization holds four to eight workshops a year.

Coley has a budget of about \$10,000 to support the workshops. Her program helps publicize the workshops by maintaining a speakers' bureau, putting notices in two statewide newsletters, sending out faxed information, and putting information on their web page.

"This is a very positive tool," Coley said. "Every workshop I have attended has had wonderful speakers, timely topics, and excellent participation. You're not going to get anything but good PR." 🌊

For more information on the Coastal Decision-Makers Workshops, contact Ginger Hinchcliff at (941) 417-6310, or e-mail her at hinchcliff_g@dep.state.fl.us. Camille Coley can be reached at (850) 922-5438, or camille.coley@dca.state.fl.us

